

BETTER HUMAN BEINGS TOMORROW

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A DOCTOR DISCUSSES FRANKLY THE PROCESS OF STERILIZATION AND ARGUES FOR WIDER USE OF THE STERILIZATION LAW

TOMORROW'S POPULATION should be produced by today's best human material. Along with 27 other forward-looking states, North Carolina has written that conviction into her laws.

Although there is legal provision for the protective sterilization of the mentally unfit, there is too little understanding of the simplicity of the surgical operation which it involves. Ignorant of the fact that no change in sexual characteristics or desires will follow, those who need this help of the State the most have often spurned it. As a result, the proportion of sterilizations to the number of hopeless mental cripples is less than 1 to 41.

Men and women who would not hesitate to demand the life of a murderer, or who believe in the life-long confinement of the criminally insane and the institutionalizing of the feeble-minded, will sometimes argue that society has no right to deny anyone the power of reproduction. Take away a person's liberty, take away his very life, but leave him his ability to create children, they insist; they disregard whether or not he has the wits or the willingness to care for his offsprings.

Much of such reasoning arises from erroneous ideas about sterilization and of North Carolina's laws concerning it. Far too many persons still confuse it with castration — the barnyard method of sterilization — and believe that in terminating a man's or woman's reproductiveness, one is also putting an end to normal enjoyment of sex. Nothing is further from the truth.

Modern tubectomy — the most widely used method of sterilization in both males and females — is an uncomplicated surgical procedure which removes nothing from the body. It merely closes the minute passages through which the reproductive cells must pass in order to unite and create a new life. No physical function or emotion is in any way affected by the closing of these minute tubes — the only change is that parenthood cannot occur.

Mysterious Genes

Popular magazines and newspapers are currently publishing considerable material on heredity and the mysterious genes — the tiny parts of the reproductive cells which control heredity. Science is giving the subject increased attention and the general public is learning more about the complex patterns by which we inherit the good and bad traits of not only our parents, but of our ancestors for several generations back. Mental characteristics, together with the more obvious physical ones, such as the color of eyes and the texture of hair, are transmitted by endless combinations of genes, about which much remains to be discovered. We do know, however, that certain characteristics which do not show up in one generation may reappear several generations later. Thus, when a mentally defective person produces a child — even though that child may be normal — it will carry a certain number of defective seeds to plant in future generations to the detriment of grandchildren or even great grandchildren.

In his recent address before the New York Academy of Medicine, Dr. H. J. Muller, whose work in the field of genetics has won him the Nobel prize, said that he believes man's normal inheritance of good health may disappear if our present indifference to human reproduction continues. At present, he pointed out, persons who inherit defects from their parents are kept alive by modern medicine and are thus able to pass these defects on to future generations. "In curing one of them today," he warned, "we are creating another case tomorrow. Control therapy must be balanced. If one-tenth of the population carries damaged germ cells, then that one-tenth should not reproduce."

A North Carolina Committee on the Problems of the Feeble Minded estimated some years ago that two per cent of the state's inhabitants fall into this classification. By applying this estimate to the population as reported by the 1940 census, it is indicated that North Carolina's feeble-

minded total some 71,000. That this estimate is extremely conservative is suggested by the more recent findings of the Selective Service, which revealed that North Carolina had the highest rate of rejectees among all the states, and that the most frequent cause of rejection was mental impairment! True, the term "mental impairment" included illiteracy as well as mental defects, but the over-all picture in relation to mental competence and the ability to rear children successfully is far from reassuring.

North Carolina's Law

North Carolina's present carefully amended sterilization law (Chapter 35, Article 7, Section 35-36 to Section 35-57) was passed in 1933. It provides for a Eugenics Board consisting of the Commissioner of Public Welfare, the Secretary of the State Board of Health, the Chief Medical Officer of the State Hospital at Raleigh, the corresponding official of another state hospital and the Attorney General. This Board must pass upon the application for sterilization of any mentally diseased, feeble-minded, or epileptic patient who, unless operated on, might have a child with a tendency to serious mental disease or deficiency. When such an operation is deemed in the interest of both the individual and the public, it is performed at the State's expense.

The Board gives careful consideration to the evidence presented to show that such an operation should be performed and the patient or his parent or guardian may appeal to the courts if there is disagreement with the Board's decision. Such legal actions are seldom instituted, however, as most patients and their families welcome the operation when they realize that it is a protection and not a sacrifice.

Toward its end, the 1947 session of the North Carolina State Legislature made provision for an Executive Secretary of the Eugenics Board who will facilitate more effective use of this wise and humane law.